

Editor's Note Kenneth A. Olliff

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 on the United States have caused us to question our ways of living and thinking, and especially our ways of being religiously. How do our beliefs serve the needs of our times? Do they contribute to the creation of a more just and less precarious, less violent world? Religious liberals historically have maintained an optimistic understanding of human nature and of creation, and a less robust sense of the tragic. The cataclysmic events of the last months have challenged liberals to recognize *Miserere* as well as *Hallelujah* in human life, and to look deeply into our faith for a healing word for our times.

The outpouring of religious expressions by Americans following the terrorist attacks has been phenomenal; in our grief and horror, we turned to religious institutions and interfaith gatherings for consolation and solace. The overtly political nature of the attacks against symbols of American nationhood provoked a fierce assertion of American identity and democratic values in the face of adversity. Taken together, these two elements—the religious responses to the attacks and the perception that they were an assault on American values—created an event in which religious conceptions of America were thrown into stark relief.

Much of the rhetoric which has followed the terrorist attacks has been constructive. Americans have expressed a greater sense of unity with one another and with humanity more broadly; we have affirmed the centrality of freedom, equality, and tolerance to our national self-understanding; and we have sought to reclaim the spiritual heritage of American democracy. Such patriotic responses express commitments which may serve to strengthen American civil society by overcoming widespread cynicism and disaffection on the part of citizens. Yet taken uncritically, they undercut the very democratic values that we as a nation profess to stand for. While much has been constructive, we have also witnessed a rise in religious nationalism, expressions of American exceptionalism, and xenophobic aggression against perceived outsiders.

Part of what I believe religious liberalism has to offer our current situation is an understanding of democracy as a spiritual vision. Affirming every human being as unique, irreducible, and created in the image of God, democracy as a spiritual vision seeks to create a just and equitable social order which will uphold the dignity and equality of all human beings. With deep affinities with the liberal tradition (articulated by figures such as John Dewey, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and James Luther Adams to name a few), spiritual democracy seeks to cultivate individuals toward a vision of human wholeness.

Such a spiritual vision of democracy allows us to draw upon the powerful commitments expressed in the wake of the terrorist attacks as sources of

democratic renewal, while at the same time allowing a criteria for assessing their nationalistic tendencies. Recognizing that democracy has a religious undercurrent, we are able to celebrate and lift up a transcendent vision of what American can be. Recognizing that democracy is a way of being in the world, we are able to bring our full selves into our common life. Yet democracy is never truly realized in history; it is rather a continual aspiration. And a spiritual vision of democracy demands that we recognize the sacredness of all humanity, not just those who reside within the borders of our nation.

How do our beliefs serve the needs of our times? In the wake of September 11, 2001, as religious liberals we are called to reach for resources in our faith that will allow us to speak a healing word for our times. A spiritual vision of democracy is one such resource, one which has much to offer the world we live in today.